

THE GREEK SCENE AT COVENT GARDEN THEATRE.



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AMONGST the Greeks and Romans, the theatres were regarded as important public buildings. Every citizen was entitled to admittance, and they were consequently required to be of large size. An arbour constructed of the branches of trees, or if in a town, a rude scaffolding, served in the early ages of Greece as a scene for dramatic representations; but these soon gave place to vast and magnificent structures in all the Grecian cities. As regards the decorations of them, there are no actual examples left; but from accounts which remain, and comparison with the theatres in Italy, it is believed that although the Greek and Roman theatres differed in some minor arrangements, they were similar in the general distribution of the parts, and were used in the same manner. The most perfect specimens remaining of the Roman theatre are those at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Their form was semi-circular, and consisted of two parts, the *area* and the *scena*. The former was appropriated to the audience, and had seats rising one above the other, of such size and height, that the back of the seat of one row served as the foot-place for the row above. The seats were in three divisions, the lower being appropriated to the magistrates, the middle to the people, and the topmost to the women. The *scena* had two main divisions, the *proscenium*, or stage, which the actors occupied, and the *orchestra*, for the bacchanals and chorus. The stage was very shallow, as compared with that of our own theatres; the back wall of it formed the scene, and was nearly the only part of the Greek theatres which was erected, as they were generally excavated in a hill, and so formed at comparatively little expense.

The theatre was open at the top, but was at times protected by a *velarium*, or awning. This was sometimes of silk, but generally of woollen cloth. It is stated that Nero once covered

the Coliseum with a purple *velarium* sprinkled with gold stars to represent the heavens, and having the chariot of the sun embroidered upon it. The *orchestra* was semi-circular, and spread out from the stage to the first row of seats, and was in reality, therefore, in the position of our pit. In the centre of it was an altar inscribed to Bacchus, in whom theatres were dedicated, because the origin of dramatic entertainments was found in the solemn processions in honour of Bacchus and Ceres, which took place at the times of harvest and vintage.

Moveable scenes were not ordinarily introduced, but it is stated there was on each side of the stage a triangular frame for painted representations, which revolved on a centre, similar to some advertising carts which may be seen in our streets.

As a conventional mode of informing the audience the relative position and character of the actors in the piece, the latter were required to enter and leave the stage by particular entrances. The scene had a principal door in the centre, called the royal door, through which only the king, or chief actor, entered and retired; this was often situated in a semi-circle, and was very richly decorated. On the right of this was a second door of less size and importance, for the next principal characters; and on the left a third door for the inferiors. Joining each end of the fixed scene was a lower wall, at right angles, in which on both sides was a door: that on the right leading to the city, for the citizens, &c., and that on the left, leading to the country, for messengers and strangers. The choruses entered the orchestra by doors at each side of it, on one side the *strophe*, on the other the *antistrophe*.

The scene was decorated with niches, containing statues, and, no doubt, as at Pompeii, so in Greece, it was painted in polychromy; as were the other chief buildings of antiquity, both Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. On the stage near the royal door was an altar to Apollo, and behind the scene were gardens and colonnades, some-

times a temple, visible when the curtains of the doors were withdrawn. The access to the principal parts of the theatre was often from the back.

The theatre always faced the sea, if a sea was near, even though it might not be visible. The reason for this arrangement probably was that as a breeze generally prevails in the after part of the day from the sea, the voice of the actors was thus carried to the audience.

We are led to make these few general remarks on the Greek stage by the production of a scene at Covent Garden Theatre for the representation of the "Antigone" of Sophocles, wherein the ancient arrangement is adhered to, as far as circumstances would allow, and which we recommend our readers to see. The manager very wisely consulted an architect for the design, and the result is a degree of completeness and architectural propriety not often found on the stage. As the pit could not be given up to the choruses and bacchanals, the front of the stage is set apart as the orchestra, and the action of the piece takes place on an elevated platform behind, from the level of which rises the fixed scene. The scene is represented by the engraving at the head of this article (made from the original drawing), and shows the principal and two secondary doors mentioned in the previous description: Cleon and his son use the centre door, Antigone and her sister the right-side door, and the *agones* and guards the left-side door. The side-walls, not shown in the engraving, contain the fourth and fifth doors before alluded to, from one of which the dead body is carried in as from the country. The *strophe* enter at the right side of their orchestra, and the *antistrophe* the left; the altar of Bacchus is in the centre of it.

The scene is decorated with statues of Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, Clio, the muse of comedy, Apollo, bas-reliefs, &c. Tripods are painted on the doorposts, figures in the panels, and the whole of the architecture is